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SUBJECT: CLOUDINESS SURROUNDING ARMENIA'S MARCH 1-2 DEATH TOLL

REF: YEREVAN 187, YEREVAN 186, YEREVAN 179

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) It has been difficult to obtain detailed information on the deaths of the eight people killed in the March 1-2 clashes between protesters and security services. Besides the total number killed, official information on the specifics of the deaths has been sparse.

The lack of a full, public accounting has only served to fuel rumors of a higher death toll and government cover-up. One prominent rumor has it that authorities planned the killings in advance in order to impose the state of emergency, clamp down on the opposition, and discredit its leaders. The fact that very few of the victims' families have gone public with details of their losses has only reinforced the currency of these rumors. Two controversial YouTube videos showing security forces shooting on and driving over presumed protesters have added even more fuel to the fire. This report represents an effort to provide details on the deaths which post has pieced together from various disparate sources (official, media and human rights groups). END SUMMARY.

OFFICIAL NUMBERS, DETAILS

¶2. (SBU) According to official information, a total of eight Armenian citizens were killed during the March 1-2 clashes in downtown Yerevan (reftels B-C). One of the deceased was a police officer and the seven others were civilians. Information provided to the Embassy by the Prosecutor General's office states that six of the eight died from wounds inflicted by weapons. This information contradicts what officials have been saying in public, which is that only four died of injuries from weapons. The Prosecutor General's Office information on the eight deaths came in the form of a quarter-page long table supplied to the Embassy that included only the following data: Name, Year of Birth, Address, and Nature of Injuries. Post has interpreted "Nature of Injuries" to mean cause of death.

¶3. (NOTE: In an effort to obtain more information on the deaths than was being publicly released in the immediate aftermath of the violence, the Embassy requested information by diplomatic note on March 5. Post received a response only on March 24, which contained

information from the Prosecutor General's Office dated March 10. Additional requests for information have been problematic in that the Prosecutor General's Office insists that requests be made by additional diplomatic notes, a condition that prevents post from a timely receipt of current information. END NOTE.)

UNOFFICIAL NUMBERS, DETAILS

¶4. (SBU) According to media reports by independent or opposition news outlets (mainly print and internet), three out of the eight victims randomly appeared at the scene of March 1-2 clashes, and were not opposition protesters but passersby who happened upon the wrong place at the wrong time. Similar reports also declared that all eight of the March 1-2 victims died from weapons wounds (seven from gunfire and one from shrapnel, the origin of which could have been either a gun or a grenade).

STATE OF EMERGENCY'S MEDIA BAN FUELS RUMOR MILL

¶5. (SBU) One of the restrictions imposed by the State of Emergency that President Kocharian decreed late on March 1 restricted what media could publish to only state-supplied information (ref A). Due to the effective media ban this produced, rumors began to spread even before the clashes ended early on March 2. These included a higher death count (anywhere from 20-50); the death of a 12-year-old child at the hands of security forces on Freedom Square early on March 1; a government cover-up to hide the higher death toll, including allegations that victims' families had been coerced or bribed by authorities to falsify additional victims' dates and causes of death. (NOTE: The father of the 12-year-old girl came forward on April 3 to publicly deny his daughter had been killed. She is alive and well. END NOTE.) One of the most conspiratorial rumors making the rounds is that the authorities planned the deaths

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in advance in order to justify the state of emergency, crack down on the opposition without having to worry about legalities, and discredit the entire opposition movement, in particular its leadership headed by ex-President Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP). This rumor has it that concealed snipers were used to kill the protesters, whose deaths justified the authorities imposing a state of emergency to prevent further loss of life.

YOUTUBE VIDEOS, NO NATIONAL MOURNING FUEL RESENTMENT

¶6. (SBU) Resentment against the authorities' heavy-handed tactics on March 1-2 continues to find outlets through hard-to-watch videos being anonymously placed on the YouTube website. On March 7, the first posted video showed riot police shooting in the direction of presumed protesters, contradicting initial claims by Armenia's Prosecutor General Aghvan Hovsepian that police did not use lethal force against protesters. Hovsepian immediately denounced the video as a fabrication, and appealed to the UN office in Yerevan for expertise in assessing its authenticity.

¶7. (SBU) More recently, on April 1 a troubling second video appeared on YouTube showing an unmarked security service vehicle with a trailer hideously running over an apparent protester at high speed. It is hard to visualize how the victim could have survived the impact, but the Prosecutor General's Office again refuted the authenticity of the video, claiming no Yerevan hospital received such a casualty the night of the clashes. None of the injuries reportedly sustained by the eight acknowledged dead appear to match the possible trauma the victim would have experienced.

¶8. (SBU) Another bone of contention expressed mainly by oppositionists and their supporters has been the perceived lack of sensitivity by authorities in mourning the eight killed in the March 1-2 clashes. Pro-opposition media reported President Kocharian's attendance at the police captain's funeral and wondered out loud why

he didn't do the same for the other seven victims. Some in the opposition camp called for a public day of mourning, which never materialized. As previously reported, wives of jailed oppositionists tried to lay flowers in honor of the dead at Freedom Square the day of the state of emergency's lifting (March 21), but police prevented them from entering the square. Some of the opposition protesters who participated in the silent protest later that evening held candles in remembrance of the dead.

NO SMOKING GUN, THOUGH

¶9. (SBU) In spite of the rumors making the rounds in Yerevan and the regions, and the resentment they have spawned, to date no concrete evidence of additional victims has surfaced. In addition, very few media have reported on the details of the deaths or the victims themselves. None of the victims' families has gone public with anti-government allegations. And very few of the victims' families have made any public statements at all. Rumors nevertheless continue to proliferate that families of unidentified March 1-2 victims were pressured or bribed by the authorities to remain quiet.

THE SOLE LAW ENFORCEMENT CASUALTY

¶10. (SBU) Age 32, police captain Hamlet Tadevosian was the only reported law enforcement casualty. According to information from the Prosecutor General's Office, he died from injuries sustained from shrapnel piercing his abdominal area. According to official press reports, he died using his body to cover a hand-grenade thrown by an opposition protester. On March 6, President Kocharian posthumously awarded him the "Battle Cross" order, second degree, and promoted him to the rank of Major.

¶11. (SBU) Mikael Danielian, director of the local human rights NGO Helsinki Association, told Emboff he heard reports that Tadevosian died from gunshots and not from a grenade explosion -- this in spite of the fact his family did not question the official cause of death in a March 28 interview with the opposition Haykakan Zhamanak (Armenian Times) daily. (NOTE: One of the authorities' allegations has been that protesters were armed with and using grenades in the March 1-2 clashes. Although the authorities to date have yet to definitively prove this claim, the official version of Tadevosian's death would give their allegation greater credence. END NOTE.)

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AT THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME

¶12. (SBU) Age 31, Zakar Hovhannisian died from gunshot wounds sustained in the abdominal area. According to independent media reports, he left his home March 1 to look for neighbor Davit Petrosian, who allegedly had gotten stuck downtown in the area of the demonstrations. Hovhannisian apparently did this in order to deter Petrosian's worried wife from going to the area herself to aid her husband. But both Hovhannisian and Petrosian were subsequently killed in the clashes. Wounded and unconscious, Hovhannisian was reportedly taken to a nearby hospital where doctors unsuccessfully operated on him. He died without regaining consciousness.

¶13. (SBU) Age 33, Davit Petrosian died of gunshot wounds to his back. On March 27, the 168 Zham (168 Hours) pro-opposition newspaper published an interview with Petrosian's widow in which she insisted that Petrosian was indifferent to politics and was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. She recounted that her husband was walking home from his jeweler's work when he learned about the growing unrest and decided to ascertain the welfare and whereabouts of a policeman friend. She grew alarmed when Petrosian stopped answering his phone calls at around 10 pm. Petrosian was taken to a nearby hospital, where he was unsuccessfully operated on and died without regaining consciousness.

¶14. (SBU) According to what doctors told his wife, Petrosian died of a bullet wound to his kidney, and irreparable damage had been done to other vital organs, including his liver, diaphragm and lungs. Mikael Danielyan told Emboff he suspected the bullet used to kill Petrosian had a shifted center of gravity, since it had entered Petrosian's right kidney through his back but exited his chest area from the top of his left lung. Mikaelian also related that doctors had detected a strong rubber odor from the wounds, suggesting a rubber bullet was the culprit.

¶15. (SBU) Age 28, Grigor Gevorgian died from a gunshot wound to his head. On March 21 the independent "Armenia Now" online news service published an interview with Gevorgian's family. They claimed that Gevorgian was a passerby who had appeared on the scene as he went out to pick up his salary from a gas station and run other errands. His wife last heard from him when he was on a downtown street in the vicinity of the clashes trying to get home. His attempts apparently failed when police blocked all nearby streets, preventing passage in or out, and ordering passersby at gunpoint to stay where they were. Gevorgian's widow said she talked to her husband for the last time at approximately 9:00 pm.

¶16. (SBU) When recovering her husband's corpse in the morgue, Gevorgian's widow said she was told her husband was felled by a sniper, and that his brain had been exploded by the bullet's impact. According to the widow, some family friends who served in the Karabakh war confirmed the sniper shot, given the location of the wound on Gevorgian's crown. On March 2, a newscast on Armenian public TV aired an interview with Gevorgian's uncle where he heaped scorn on LTP. However, on March 6, Gevorgian's uncle told the pro-opposition Zhamanak Yerevan (Yerevan Times) daily that those who interviewed him presented credentials from an opposition media outlet, and that his words were cut and taken out of context. He acknowledged, however, that when he spoke out against LTP, he was doing so in response to a report which he had received that his nephew had been killed by a mob of opposition protesters. Only later did he learn that his nephew had been killed by bullet fire.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

¶17. (SBU) Age 29, Gor Kloyan died from injuries caused by shrapnel penetration from an unspecified weapon in the pelvic area. According to an interview with his family published March 21 by "Armenia Now," Kloyan had left home March 1 without announcing his destination to anybody. His family then learned about his fate around midnight from Hospital Number 3, where he had been taken after suffering shrapnel wounds to his leg. With his aorta irrevocably damaged, doctors failed to save his life. His family told the media that he never attended any rallies, and in fact was a member of the governing Prosperous Armenia political party. He also served as a proxy for Serzh Sargsyan at one of the polling stations, and worked for his campaign as a truck driver. The family expressed disappointment that none of the ruling political parties sent condolences for their loss.

¶18. (SBU) Age 34, Armen Farmanian sustained life-ending injuries to
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his skull by "foreign bodies." On March 22, the pro-opposition Haykakan Zhamanak (Armenian Times) daily published an interview with his family, who appeared dumbfounded that Farmanian could have appeared at the scene of the clashes. Both of his brothers work for law enforcement bodies. Human rights activist Mikael Danielyan, who remains in close touch with the widow, told Emboff that Farmanian was struck by a bullet in the back of his head. According to Danielian, the coroner said that the bullet had split into three parts in Farmanian's skull, something he said he had never seen before in his line of work.

LITTLE KNOWN

¶19. (SBU) Age 23, Tigran Khachatryan died from injuries sustained to his skull by "foreign bodies." A March 6 report that appeared on InfoArmenia.org -- one of numerous news websites and web blogs created by opposition supporters to circumvent the state of emergency-imposed information blockade, and allegedly maintained by the Association of Investigative Journalists - confirmed that Khachatrian died from gunshot wounds to the head.

¶20. (SBU) Age 47, Hovhannes Hovhannisian (47) is reported to have died from injuries caused by gunshot wounds on the right of his back. Nothing else has been reported about this victim.

THE STILL GRAVELY INJURED

¶21. (U) According to an April 3 press release from the Ministry of Health, Yerevan hospitals are still treating five victims from the March 1-2 events, including four civilians and one security service personnel. No further details were provided. But on March 25, RFE/RL published an article describing the condition of those wounded during the March 1-2 events who were still receiving care in local hospitals.

¶22. (SBU) Age 19, policeman Tigran Abgarian suffered a perforating gun wound, and his spinal cord in the neck area was damaged. His condition on March 25 was listed as grave. The Embassy confirmed with his hospital on April 4 that his perilous condition remains unchanged.

¶23. (SBU) Age 26, the civilian Ruben Torosyan also received a perforating gunshot to his head. (NOTE: Information obtained from the Prosecutor General's Office indicates he is a resident of one of the areas where the March 1-2 clashes took place. END NOTE.) Torosyan was initially pronounced dead on March 1, but later proclaimed to be alive.

COMMENT

¶24. (SBU) It's probably safe to say that neither the Armenian public nor the international community will ever know the full truth behind the bloody March 1-2 clashes. Regardless of the authorities' and opposition's competing versions of events, their disturbing nature alone raises concerns about the way the GOAM responded to the crisis, and how it continues to publicly account -- or not -- for the drastic, lethal measures it took. Until the authorities provide an independent, transparent explanation to Armenia's citizenry describing what really transpired in the dark hours of March 1-2, the infamy of the events will dog the ruling regime and risk undermining its legitimacy.

PENNINGTON